Briner's Wheat.

BY CHARLES FLEMING EMBREE.

AT THE EDGE of Princeton stood the Summit mill. Dry, dusty and sunny-yellow was the stretch of wagon ground in front, and the box-like office was in the middle of it, a lone wooden thing. It was half-past 11. The sound that issued from the six wooden stories of the building was like an undercurrent to all things, and the gray edifice trembled.

Tom Jordan, the young office man, sat on his stool in the rear room of the box. In the front room young Mr. Dawson argued with old Mr. Shackner.

"It's the second offer from Rome, Ga., in a week, and the third from Tallahassee. It's good; we must conciliate. We must keep their trade whatever we do." Jordan could see black-bearded Dawson fidgeting.

"We wouldn't have done it five years ago. Three dollars and fifteen cents for a barrel of patent flour. We used to make a profit of a dollar a barrel. But go on—do as you like."

"Conciliation, you know; following the times," cried Dawson, running about and rubbing his hands. "Now, Tommie; write out that telegram, Tommie."

Outside a farm wagon heavily laden came round the corner of the cooper shop. James Briner, a farmer, drove the team, and by his side sat a girl.

"Why, Jamie—why, I'm mighty glad to see you, Jamie!" Mr. Dawson was trotting into the street. "And Miss Maude—well; I thought you were in Greencastle at college. Brought in a little wheat, Jamie? All right—all right!"

"Times too hard for college!" blurted Briner's staccato voice. His face was rough-cut, not unlike an Indian's, hairless, brownish red, vaguely humorous, plainly rendered ruggedor by trouble. "What you goin' to give me for this wheat, hey?"

"Oh, Mr. Briner," came old white Shackner's sick and complaining tones. "fifty-eight is the best we can do; dear me."

"The Lord's tryin' to kill off the farmers—huh—I see that," was the grim reply.

"Why, Jamie," cried Dawson, examining the wheat. "We'll make you the very highest price the market allows. Drive right on, Jamie. Tommie, weigh Mr. Briner's wagon, now, Tommie." The horses' feet pounded the wooden platform.

"Your daughter would make a fine painting up there," called Jordan.

The wagon made the long sweep, scattering the pigeons, and drew up at the mill.

Tom, in gray trousers and vest, coatless, lead pencil in his pocket, came over here, too.

"You've promised to show me the mill," said Maude, a little diffidently.

"Give me your hand," he cried, and she leaped down. They entered the rumbling edifice.

It was necessary, all over the mill, for him to lead her by her hand; and she shrank and was afraid and laughed full of joy at the same time.

"I'll show you where your father's wheat comes in," said he, leading on among steel monsters.

"There it comes." He pointed to a hole where a line of grain began its screw-like progress. "Maude, I'm glad you couldn't go back to Greencastle."

"I was sorry," she murmured, her face turned away. "It's papa's money troubles. I'll maybe have to teach."

"Maude—if you love me, you'll never have to teach!"

She startled, uttered a faint cry, like a sob and one note of happy laughter mingled together. He put his arms around her and kissed her.

"But—what will father say? He's desperate all the time of late. He doesn't like college men very well. You'll have to be very careful, Tom, to say the right things to him!" she cried, appealingly.

"I'll come tomorrow and I'll try to win him," said he, determined.

II.

The farm was only a mile from town. The house, near the road, with a lawn in front, was of brick.

"That's Shackner & Dawson's buggy. I see that," muttered Mr. Briner, striding to the front gate. "Come in, Mr. Jordan; if you can eat mortgaged victuals you're welcome to 'em."

Jordan tied his horse and stepped onto the lawn.

"Mr. Briner, I'm sorry if you've been having any thouble," he said.

"Trouble! Huh! It's the man that lent me the money that's been havin' the trouble," mused James. "Mine comes next."

They went in.

"You had to come into the country to get something to eat, I know," said Mrs. Briner. "Town folks starve, poor things. Walk to the dining room, Mr. Jordan."

As he and Maude entered last, he stole the pressure of her hand behind her back.

"Mr. Jordan, I have to coax this girl to eat," said Mrs. Briner, pointing at Maude. "Maude never eats."

"She blooms on it," blurted Briner.

Tom sought vaguely for some acceptable speech to bestow on the grim farmer.

"About the wheat," ventured he, "I've wondered why the farmers all raise wheat, anyhow. That's why the price goes down. I've wondered now if you couldn't raise something new, I've heard of a jasmine farm in Texas."

"Aw!" cried Briner, gazing at the well. He was quite disgusted.

"They have big flower dealers in Indianapolis. Why don't you turn your farm into—well, say—"

Maude's eyes looked scared.

"A violet farm, for instance," said Tom.

"What!" burst out Briner, and got suddenly up, the sum of his troubles overpowering him. "Never mind—never mind—young folks have got to talk," and he stalked away.

"Oh, Tom; you said the wrong thing," cried Maude.

III.

The sorrows of James Briner were coming to a crisis, and of that crisis the barn was the fitting scene. At 4 o'clock he entered the red edifice. There were bins of good wheat, waiting. He looked at them sorrowfully.

"Smutty," muttered he. "Three-fourths of the crop. James Briner, the devil's tempting you."

He took a letter out of his pocket thing, pay—pay, the creditors can wait and read it over. It meant only one no more. He read his doom in that epistle, and, chewing it up, he thought of Maude.

"Lord!" cried he, as though his thoughts were half a prayer, "I've slaved too many years for this. It's a great fall, old Briner. And they've called you the richest farmer in Gibson county for years. If I put in the smutty wheat just once, enough to tide over, maybe I could make it up some time again, and the price'll go up next year.

"You've been a just man all your life," the farmer said. "You can afford to sin once. A layer of good on top, and the bad underneath. They don't have to examine your wheat any more."

He in the shadow could see a little sunlit scene at the well, without being observed.

"Will he lose anything, Maude?" asked Jordan.

"I'm afraid—her eyes were wet—"I'm afraid so, Tom."

Briner's heart smote him. The world had made him, without, a rock. The tears of Maude, sitting by the well with her lover, broke him. He rested his head against the boards of the bin of smutty wheat.

"The devil's won for once," groaned he.

IV.

"I'm going up to the depot," whined Shackner. "Here Jim came down and said there weren't any cars for us. Oh, my—what kind of a railroad, anyhow? How do they expect us to ship flour?"

"No freight cars," cried Dawson. "Why, Tommie, you told them we had that Nashville order ready to fill. Why, Tommie—O, say, Mr. Shackner, now I thought I'd make an offer of two-forty for that—Oh, Jim! Jim! come in here. Never mind—go ahead! I said go ahead! Now, I thought two-forty for that low-grade——"

"Go on, go on," mumbled Shackner as he moved away on the cinder path. "Give it away for nothing if you want."

"Tommie," ran on Dawson, "wheat's going down a cent; offer fifty-seven, and don't buy anything but the best at that. Wilkinson said Briner's going to haul today."

A buggy came round the corner of the cooper shop at a brisk rate. Out came a blue hat and a pair of dancing eyes, and a girl jumping to the ground.

"Isn't father here yet," cried Maude, daintily confused. "I was just going to town. Goodby. I wanted to see him."

"Don't get in!" implored he.

She paused.

"Why?" faltered she.

"Is that all you came for?"

"I—I thought he would be cold. I brought his muffler," she said, blushing holding the white thing up.

"It's hot as can be," ejaculated he. "But—oh, of course, it'll probably get cold. You'd better come in and wait for him."

Up the road came the four heavily laden wagons. On the first seat sat Briner.

"Good morning, Mr. Briner," said Jordan.

"We're glad to get your wheat today," said Tom, still anxiously. "We need it."

"I've waited my head off for the price to rise. What you gimme today?"

"I'm sorry. The market's very bad, Mr. Briner." Tom was rather pale just now. "We can't give you but 57 today."

"Git up!" The horse's feet pounded after. Maude got up from the doorsill of the mill and stumbled to the buggy. Tom, looking out of the office door, saw her drive down the road, letting the little black horse have his way, for Maude was weeping.

V.

"I don't know what the business is coming to," said Shackner, in plaintive distress, "if all our old stand-bys go like that. Oh, my, James, you've made me sick."

"The old scoundrel, the old rip!" cried Dawson.

"Mr. Dawson," said Jordan, coming in from the rear office, where he had been sitting with his fingers in his hair, "I have something to say about this."

Shackner's dissimilar eyes swung round slowly to Tom, with a vague hope in them.

"I'm going to try to prove to you," said Tom, with firmness "that this is a case in which there is reason to excuse,"

"I don't see how we could," murmured Shackner, seeming, nevertheless, to grasp with the invalid's eagerness at that idea.

"It happens," cried Tom, flushing a little and standing before the two, "that I've seen the cause of th's. Mr. Shackner, you've known that man for thirty years, and you never knew him to do a wrong thing before. Every summer year after year, you've paid him a big check for the best crop in the county. You've lent him money in advance and without interest. And there was a time, too, when you weren't so well known here yourself but that Briner's word at the bank gave you a lift."

"True," quavered Shackner. "James was sitting here when I got the telegram about the elevator burning down in Petersburg."

"You know how long he's worked, for you've worked with him. He never bought a piece of ground or built a barn without telling you his plans first. You know what the slow accumulation of his property has meant to him, and how it is that his farm and the prosperity of his wife and daughter have been his life. Well—now he's in debt."

"Think what it meant to him to lose everything—forty years' work wiped out. Maybe I don't know much about business, Mr. Dawson, but I do know this, that the one time a good man falls down is the one time to be charitable. Now, I don't say that Briner is going to be trusted as he was before. You can watch his wheat. It's easy enough to keep smut out of the mill, if that's all you want. What I do say is that you men ought to drive out to James Briner's farm and clear this matter up. And if he did this thing because he's been tempted past his powers, you ought to stand by him."

"We can't," said Dawson. "The only ground you could possibly do such a fool thing on is that it might be business—conciliation."

"I'll declare," said Shackner, mooning about unhappily, "you're right—I was going to, anyhow."

"To what?" sharply rasped Dawson.

"Oh—just drive out," whined the other. "James, James, I'd be willing to advance you a little, but"——

"But!" exploded Dawson, under his breath.

"Oh, I'd begrudge him every cent of it, Mr. Dawson, dear me."

VI.

On Thursday morning along the road drove Shackne and Tom in a buggy. They were admitted to the parlor, whose shutters Mrs. Briner threw open in haste. She grasped the hand of each and said in agitation:

"He isn't like himself; oh, Mr. Shackner, don't forget that he's getting old."

Shackner and Tom stood up, and Maude came in and sat on a sofa. Now Briner loomed in the door, entered and stood by a what-not with his wife.

Oh, James, you've made me sick," said Shackner, his wide eye shining on the farmer. "What did you do it for? Is it a debt? How much is it? Or was it just a mistake?"

"No," said James, "it wasn't a mistake. I took that smut and I put it in them wagons, and I took good wheat and I smeared it on top. If there's any mistake, the devil made it."

He walked to the window. "Look at them fields; look at that corn; look at these barns. Mr. Shackner, you know what I've done to get 'em. Well, they're in soak and they can stay there to kingdom come. I'm busted."

"Why, James, I can't see you busted," complained Shackner. "I could lend you some. You don't deserve it. I'm just doing it because Jordan there made me. Jordan explained the thing. It's the way Jordan saw it. You can blame Tom for it. I begrudge you every cent of it."

"Take it away," groaned Briner.

Maude arose, walked to Shackner and said:

"If you really mean it Mr. Shackner, and will take my word that father will pay it back, I'll take it."

"Your word's better'n his," said Shackner, staring at Briner.

She took it and laid it on the whatnot.

Briner at length sat down stiffly on a chair, and his wife came and clung to him.

"Look here young man," said he, after a long time, to Tom, at whom he had been staring, "ain't you the feller that made some crack about jasmines."

Tom's eyes turned to Maude.

"Something about a violet farm?" continued Briner.

"That was a joke, father."

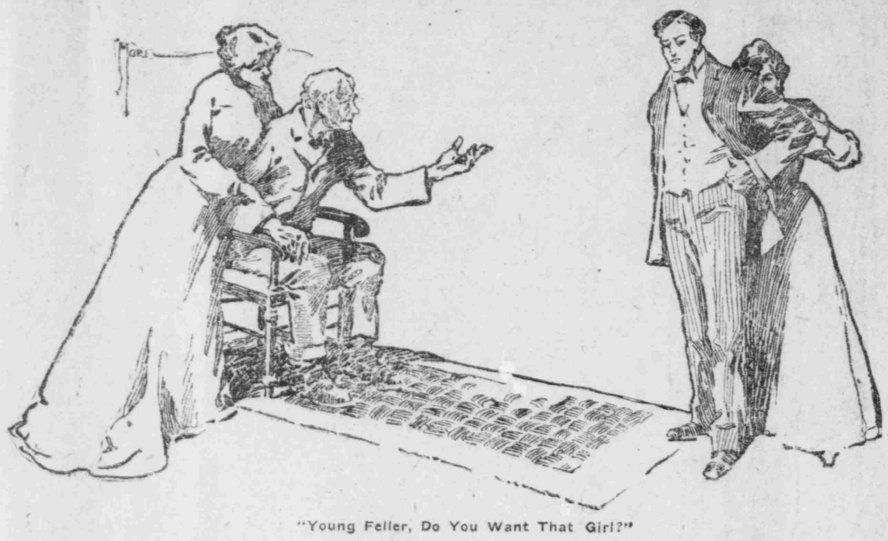
"Wuz it? What have you got to do with it? Say, are you still so fond of the millin' business?"

"I'm fond of Tom," she said, with her head down. "I told you last night."

"Tawm, Tawm," mused Briner. "Young feller, do you want that girl?"

Tom's answer was not uncertain.

"Well"—he meditated a long time—"why don't you git hold of her?"



"Young Feller, Do You Want That Girl?"

EQUAL TO THE EMERGENCY.

(Chicago Tribune.)

"What are you doing here?" demanded the man of the house suddenly appearing on the scene.

The burglar, though surprised, retained his presence of mind.

"This is a part of my initiation into the Alphabetta Gammadella fraternity," he said. "I gotta to do it, pard. I ain't takin' nothin' but a necktie. Would you mind shootin' a hole through this cap, so's I can show it to the boys? Thanks."

Whereupon he backed to the window, climbed out, slid down the corner pillar of the porch with a facility acquired by long practice, and vanished in the darkness.

BREAKERS AHEAD.

(Cleveland Leader.)

"It will probably be many years before I find my ideal girl."

"And what will you do in the meantime?"

"Oh, get married, no doubt."